

Thomas Pendergast

Business Owner and “Political Boss”
1873-1945

by Susan Jezak Ford

For many years of the early twentieth century, Thomas Pendergast controlled Kansas City as a president would control a large corporation. Posing as a mere businessman, Pendergast ran the city: workers were provided jobs, chosen politicians ran the government, and the entire “machine” made a profit that filled his pockets. Pendergast brought more corruption to Kansas City than anyone in history, but he is also credited with helping the city survive the Great Depression.

Thomas Joseph Pendergast was born in 1873 in St. Joseph, Missouri, one of nine children. He came to Kansas City in the 1890s and worked in the saloon in the West Bottoms owned by his brother Jim. Tom learned about Kansas City’s political system and the advantages of controlling blocks of voters from his older brother. When Jim died in 1911, the reins of the local Democratic Party were passed to Tom.

Under Pendergast’s direction, alcohol flowed during prohibition, gambling flourished, and scores of ballots were cast to keep political friends in power. In return, prime government building contracts were awarded to Pendergast-controlled companies, such as the Ready Mixed Concrete Company.

The Pendergast Machine vote ensured the passage of a \$40 million bond program that led to the construction of numerous civic buildings during the Depression. The unemployed lined up daily at 1908 Main Street seeking an influential recommendation that could secure a job in tough times. His power extended from the lowest janitor to Harry S. Truman, a handpicked 1934 candidate for U.S. Senate.

Local reformers despised Pendergast’s corruption and control. Urged on by Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg, citizens and the press relentlessly demanded change. Reform candidates were elected to the City Council in 1934, and Pendergast’s decline began. His addiction to betting at the racetrack led to his ultimate downfall. He was arraigned in 1939 on failing to pay taxes on a bribe received



to pay off gambling debts. After serving 15 months in prison, he lived quietly at his home, 5650 Ward Parkway, until his death in 1945.

Sources

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